Content Analysis of Input Gathered at the
Community Open Space Summit

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Introduction

On October 11-13, 2001, the Urban Open Space Foundation presented a Community Open Space Summit in Appleton, Wisconsin to explore, shape, and launch a broad-based network for local action. Staff Sociologists from the Wisconsin DNR's Bureau of Integrated Science Service were asked to perform a content analysis of the Summit. The purpose of this analysis is to guide Summit leaders as they complete work on refining the Draft Working principles.

Methodology

Content analysis, a qualitative method of evaluation, emphasizes the importance of understanding the meanings behind the data. Utilizing data gathered from individual participants and small groups at the Open Space Summit, this content analysis attempts to understand participants' thoughts and feelings about the topics presented. Data, in this case, is in the form of direct quotations, collected on worksheets and flip charts throughout the Summit. These quotations reveal the participants' thoughts, emotions, and basic perceptions about Community Open Space and the Draft Working Principles. Understanding and meaning emerge from the evaluators' in-depth analysis of the verbatim quotations.

Qualitative evaluation begins with data collection. The data are then analyzed and organized into major themes and categories. Since the evaluators are looking for overriding themes in the data, not every quotation is used in the final summary of findings. The evaluators provide a framework for understanding Summit participants' views, opinions, and ideas in a way that is clear and concise, while accurately and thoroughly presenting the diverse points of view of the participants.

The Content Analysis of the Community Open Space Summit includes participants' personal visions of open space, comments on the Draft Working Principles, and suggestions for additional open space principles.

Principal Findings

1. The proposed open space principles need to be more user-friendly.

Most of the participants' comments and concerns focused on the usability of the Draft Working Principles. Participants expressed frustration with the terminology that was used and the format of the principles. Many people felt that there were too many principles. There was confusion over the wording of the principles and a general misunderstanding of how the principles would be used. Because of this, some participants believed that all of the principles were meant to be applied to all open spaces.

2. The principles need to have more emphasis on the natural environment.

There was a strong feeling among many of the participants that the principles should have more of an environmental emphasis. Many participants commented on the principles' lack of environmental focus and the importance of addressing environmental issues in the open space principles.

3. Specific principles need to be clarified.

Various comments were made about specific principles. The principles that caused the most concern for Summit participants were the principles of Association (8), Full Participation (5), Environmental Justice (10), Community Ideals (1), Proximity (3), and Innovation (4). Most of the comments about these principles were related to wording, terminology, and the misunderstanding that every principle must apply to every situation.

4. People have clear ideas about what they want and need in open spaces.

Participants' personal vision statements and suggestions for additional principles clearly illustrated that they have definite opinions about the types of open spaces that they feel are necessary and appropriate. Comments included what spaces should feel like and look like, how spaces should be used and by whom, and how spaces could be created.

Personal Vision

Summit participants formed small groups and were asked to consider the elements of their own personal vision of community open space. Each person was directed to imagine ten years into the future and to think in the present tense. Participants were given approximately 15 minutes to think about their personal visions and to write a short description of what it would feel like, look like, and sound like to have successfully created the kinds of open spaces that enrich each person's life and that of the community. Then, participants were asked to share some key words and phrases that described their visions, followed by a group discussion.

Groups reported a wide range of personal visions for open space. In order to analyze these visions, similar comments were grouped together and categorized based on their overriding themes. The final categories are as follows:

      I.   What the space will feel like, look like, and sound like.

      II.   How the space will be used and by whom.

      III.   How the space will be created.

Each of these three main categories has several sub-categories, labeled with our own headings. For the most part, these category headings are not participant's own words, but words and/or phrases that summarize the participants' comments. Following these sub-headings are typical verbatim comments from participants, in italics. The number of comments for each sub-category is listed in parentheses following the heading.

Though the data was analyzed qualitatively, a quantitative analysis is helpful for realizing the relative importance of each category. Statistical analysis of the number of comments in each category revealed that 47% of all comments were grouped into category I, 34% into category II, and 18% into category III.

Understanding people's personal visions of community open space can be helpful for creating spaces that are responsive to the wants and needs of the public. This is a useful tool for discovering the key aspects of the public's vision of open space, and quantitative analysis of the data can help determine what people feel are the most important characteristics of such spaces.

I.   **What the space will feel like, look like, and sound like.** (47%)

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The majority of participants' personal visions of open space included key words
and phrases that described actual physical features of a space or a person's
emotional response to a space. Also included in this category are a few
comments regarding the number and locations of open spaces.

Physical Features (22)

Personal visions of the physical features of open spaces focused almost
exclusively on the natural environment, including specific natural features
such as trees, flowers, and landscapes.

All streets tree-lined

A place to observe / absorb creative and natural beauty

Lots of flowers

Places to see the sky, track the seasons.

Places where the land and water can heal.

Preserving natural features such as overlooks or rock outcroppings.

Feelings (21)

Many participants' personal visions of open space focused on an emotional
response to a space and/or how a person would feel when using this space.

Safe (4)

Welcoming (3)

Place to get away from the business of life

Invigorating

Revitalized, cleansed, renewed

Relaxing

Number of spaces (4)

A few participants commented on how many open spaces they wanted and one participant suggested areas where open space might be created.

Ubiquitous

(The space) could be in an industrial or commercial area.

II.   **How the space will be used and by whom.** (34%)

Many participants' personal visions of open space related to the types of activities that the spaces would support and the types of people who should be accommodated in open spaces.

How it will be used (14)

Participants' comments reflected their visions for open spaces that support many specific and diverse uses.

Places to gather

A place for performance and areas for public presentation

Multifunctional

Space for both active and passive activities

Designed for flexibility

Educational

Places for outdoor education close to home

Creating community (8)

Many comments focused on a vision of open space as a vehicle for encouraging and creating a sense of community. Participants also stressed the importance of open spaces that are responsive to the needs of the neighborhood in which they are sited.

Should reflect the needs of the people within the community or neighborhood

Togetherness

Neighborhood supported, community based

Who will use it (9)

Participants' personal visions of community open space included inclusion of and access for all people. Some people also commented on the importance of having a space where different types of people can interact.

Designed for all (teenagers, diverse cultures)

Places designed for the elderly, small children and other special groups to interact

It should be accessible, close by, and have pedestrian access.

III.   **How the space will be created.** (18%)

_____

Many participants had ideas about how community open spaces would be created.

Planned system (13)

Some personal visions included much planning and a long-term, regional view of community open spaces.

[Open spaces will be] sustainable and well managed and maintained

Long term vision of what is needed to protect the next 50 plus years and an implementation plan

An interlocked system of trails and natural landscapes that connect natural artificial and historical sites

Linear parkways linking larger open spaces

Creates regional sustainable system

Implementation issues (3)

In addition, a few participants were concerned with obstacles to the creation of open spaces.

[We need] better-educated elected officials

Leaders and community should be educated about the value of open space

Permanently zoned, not temporary

Open Space Principles

Summit participants discussed the open space principles in facilitated small groups. In each group, participants first worked individually to evaluate the degree to which each of the 15 Draft Working Principles reflected their vision for the future of community open space. They did this by formally ranking each principle on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (See Chart A, p.15). A short discussion followed. Then, participants were asked to write down any comments about the principles in general and/or comments about specific principles, and were given the opportunity to share their comments with the group.

Individual comments were on separate worksheets and group comments, as a result of the discussions, were on flip charts. Both types of data were collected from each group, and data from all of the groups were combined and divided into two broad categories, General Comments and Specific Principle Comments. In addition, the comments in each of these categories were grouped together by theme. Examples of the most prevalent themes were summarized and participants' comments are presented verbatim, in italics.

General Comments

Participants expressed many various concerns about the Draft Working Principles. Most of the personal and group comments focused on the usability of the principles. There was also much concern about the principles' lack of emphasis on environmental issues. In addition, there were many comments about the lack of language related to linkages, private land, and education.

The proposed open space principles need to be more user-friendly.

THE PRINCIPLES ARE TOO WORDY AND THE TERMINOLOGY IS CONFUSING.

Need refinement and definition of terms.

Keep it clean, simple, and memorable.
Need a tool that is much simpler. One that:
- *Stirs the imagination*

- *Has sound bites to capture attention*
- *Articulates the value of open space*

Present tense [is] confusing.

THERE ARE TOO MANY PRINCIPLES.

Fifteen principles are too many! Can't sell this to a county board, you'd lose them.

There are too many principles. Reduce to 4 or 5.

[The principles need to be] more brief and focus on fewer areas.

THE PRINCIPLES SHOULD BE PRESENTED IN AN EASIER TO USE FORMAT.

The principles are good for education, but decision-makers will not read or use this.

The principles look too much like government bureaucracy.

THE WORDING OF THE PRINCIPLES IS TOO STRICT.

Not all open spaces have to be all things to all people. Some language suggests that all open spaces [must] meet all principles.

All parks should have all principles?

SOME PRINCIPLES ARE MORE IMPORTANT THAN OTHERS.

I would like an opportunity to rank order these principles

All fifteen principles are weighed the same in this exercise.

I don't like the categories

The principles need to have more emphasis on the natural environment.

[Open space should] not compromise the integrity of the landscape.

To me, open space is not simply parks and trails. It begins when I step outside my door. It is the quality of the environment.

Activities and development will be done in such a way as to introduce only those resources that are clean (not contaminated) and will not compromise the integrity of the landscape.

[The principles should address] protecting environmentally special places.

There is no mention of beauty, natural, peaceful, color, variety of species and natural habitats.

The principles need to mention links between open spaces.

[There is] no mention of links. Park to park, home to park. This needs to have a greater importance, especially for future planning.

Need to think of links from local open space, to regional open space, to national open space, to world open space.

The principles should not be limited to public open spaces.

Not all open space needs to be public - private open space should be encouraged.

How about private open space? How does that relate to what we are talking about?

The principles need to address the issue of education.

Add something about involving education, for example, involvement of students and individuals of all ages to learn from designing and helping build open spaces.

Not enough [emphasis] on education.

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Comments on Specific Principles

Personal and collective comments on specific principles were gathered from each group and separated into categories based on the specific principle to which the comment referred. There was at least one comment on every principle; however, six principles received the most comments. All of the comments on these six principles were analyzed and themes were identified. The principles that received the most comments are as follows, by order of the number of comments:

      8. Association (20)
      5. Full Participation (16)
    10. Environmental Justice (15)
      1. Community Ideals (13)
      3. Proximity (10)
      4. Innovation (9)

Also see Chart A (p.15) to gain further insight into participants level of agreement with each principle. Although most people agree with all of the principles, in general, the six principles that received the most comments are also the principles that tend to have the greatest level of dispersion of levels of agreement. Some people report feelings of neutrality, disagreement, or that they do not understand these principles. In the summary below, the comments on these specific principles are presented in numerical order.

1. Community Ideals. Open space planning and decision-making is responsive to citizens' recreational needs, the local and regional economy, community assets, and broader social development goals. (13)

Almost all of the concern with this principle was with the word "recreation". People felt that other issues were more important than recreational needs, such as citizen values, ecological health, and natural resources. Several people noted that there should be more emphasis on the process being citizen and community driven.

> *While the principle espouses a desirable ideal, the focus in the principle implies changing open space based on the economic climate, and only speaks to recreational needs, not ecological health.*

> *"Recreation" needs defining – if it is harmful to the environment I would disagree – like jet skis (noise pollution and water pollution)*

> *Too often driven primarily by recreational needs with a less than clear understanding of the others.*

CHART A

This Draft Working Principle is an essential component of my vision for the future of community open space.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't understand
1. Community Ideals	28	17	33	0	0	1
2. Environmental Science	30	15	0	2	0	1
3. Proximity	31	8	5	2	1	0
4. Innovation	23	20	2	2	1	1
5. Full Participation	26	16	3	2	1	0
6. Variety	27	14	3	0	2	1
7. Accessibility	30	18	0	0	0	0
8. Association	12	12	15	4	0	4
9. Quality	33	9	3	0	1	1
10. Environmental Justice	18	19	7	6	1	0
11. Character	23	18	7	1	0	0
12. Safety	34	10	0	5	0	0
13. Stewardship	31	13	4	2	0	1
14. Funding	32	12	4	1	0	0
15. Adaptability	25	13	5	1	0	1

3. Proximity. Public parks, open spaces, and natural areas are sufficiently numerous and located close enough to users, so that all Wisconsin residents in cities and growing communities enjoy safe, equitable pedestrian access. (10)

People didn't believe that pedestrian access for all was possible and expressed concern for rural communities. Several people commented that parks and open spaces should have a benefit or purpose other than being within walking distance. Other comments brought up bicycle access issues and the idea of linkages between parks.

> *Pedestrian access not only from neighborhoods to parks, but also from park to park and provide links throughout the city*

> *May not always be equitable since some quality natural resource features may not be nearby.*

> *I'm not sure how all Wisconsin residents would have pedestrian access. The parks should be readily accessible but should reflect some community and/or natural benefit or purpose.*

4. Innovation. Park professionals, community organizers and public officials are engaged in creative partnerships, which lead to innovative strategies. (9)

People were concerned about the wording of this principle and felt that the principle could be more inclusive, particularly by including neighborhood residents and groups. A couple of people also expressed concern over the feasibility of implementation.

> *Creative partnerships are important, but should involve the actual people involved – the neighborhood residents – not just professionals and public officials. We can all learn from each other to form innovative strategies.*

> *Innovative strategies often fail to evolve, as there is a perception that they can't or won't be implemented.*

5. Full Participation. The design process for parks and natural areas provides for the meaningful involvement of traditional and non-traditional partners, including area residents, local businesses, police, artists, historians, urban agriculturists, educators, and cultural anthropologists. (16)

Virtually all of the comments on this principle stated that the list of partners was too limiting and/or left out important people and groups. Many people suggested partners that should be added to the list, such as children, politicians, community leaders, scientists, and natural resource professionals. Other people felt that full participation was unrealistic and that every situation does not need such broad involvement.

> *Full participation is essential, but area residents should be considered the most important group and be the most involved. Consider the residents an untapped resource in planning, design, and implementation.*

> *Not <u>all</u> of these people can contribute to everything – we'd never get anything done.*

> *List is too limiting; when you start being so specific you miss important partners, e.g. Youth; if you have "historians" why not "futurists"?*

8. Association. Public parks, open spaces, and natural areas are sited near other community assets. (20)

Several people didn't understand this principle. People were uncertain about what is considered a community asset and felt that open spaces were assets in and of themselves. Many people expressed concern about the feasibility of siting new open space near other assets and commented that the idea may be limiting or conflicting with other principles.

> *Not all spaces need to be adjacent to other assets – some special places may not be. Perhaps links can be established to encourage going to them.*

> *I don't think park and open spaces have to be sited near other community assets. After all, they may become the community assets.*

> *What are 'community assets'? Isn't really everything in a community an asset?*

> *This could be read as an excuse to NOT invest in open space in the most blighted neighborhoods.*

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10. Environmental Justice. Public parks, open spaces, and natural areas are established in neighborhoods most blighted in character or deficient in park space. (15)

The bulk of the comments on this principle focused on the limiting nature of the wording. People thought that the principle meant to establish open spaces exclusively in blighted neighborhoods and felt that the condition of the community should not be the sole determining factor. People mentioned that all neighborhoods and all people need open space and that it should be established wherever possible. A few people were confused by the terminology.

> *Way goal is stated, makes this sound like an imperative; won't build broad-based public support but seems as another "welfare" program if not combined with vision that improves quality of urban life for all.*

> *I agree that blighted, underserved neighborhoods deserve to get more parks and open spaces first. However, since I believe that high quality open spaces in urban / near urban neighborhoods can be crucial to attracting and keeping middle class and upper class people / families in urban areas (thus slowing suburban sprawl, the undesirable loss of farmland, forests, etc.), I do not want those middle class neighborhoods to end up without their needed high-quality open space.*

> *All people need open space, not just the ones in the most distressed areas.*

Additional Principles

Summit participants were encouraged to suggest additional principles that may be added to the Draft Working Principles. These comments were discussed and posted on flip charts in the facilitated small groups. The comments from all of the groups were combined.

Participants had few suggestions for additional principles. As a result, all of the comments are presented verbatim. The additional principles were categorized using the same methods as for the Personal Vision statements, for ease of analysis and comparison due to the similarities between the two exercises.

I. What the space will feel like, look like, and sound like. (27%)

Connectedness: open spaces are connected to each other and to natural resources [such] as rivers, lakes.

Regional perspective lacking in principles. Areas used [are] close to urban areas.

Working landscapes, open spaces within traditional land uses (i.e. farms, fisheries, and forests). Principles need to show support for these.

II. How the space will be used and by whom. (36%)

Open space fosters and provides a sense of community.

Focal point of community use and interest, a gathering place [that] fosters relationships.

Urban parks and open spaces are distinct from nearby areas. Urban parks and open spaces are a destination people want to go to, use, and enjoy.

Educational: ecological ethic, urban focus, elementary age children [should] have [non-classroom] experiences with and in the natural environment (woodlands, prairies, not soccer fields).

III. How the space will be created. (36%)

Planned communication, public relations, marketing of open spaces.

Joint community planning.

The design and approval process for new urban open spaces is efficient, understandable, and responsive. (Can't take years!)

Need to ensure that open spaces are legally [and] permanently protected.

NOTE: There was a distinct shift in how people thought about their personal vision for open space versus their suggestions for additional principles. When considering their personal visions, people thought more about Category I. When thinking about additional principles, more people were concerned with Category III. 18% of comments fell into Category III in the Personal Vision section, while 36% of comments fell into this category in the Additional Principles section.

Since the personal vision comments were made before the Draft Working Principles were presented and the Additional Principles comments were made after much discussion of the draft principles, we can conclude that the aspects that were most important in participants' personal visions of open space were better addressed by the principles, eliciting fewer suggestions for additional principles to cover these issues. Conversely, the increase in the percentage of comments related to how open spaces will be created may indicate a need for more emphasis on this subject and a revision of the principles to reflect people's visions of open space.

Conclusion

Summit participants expressed diverse points of view through their numerous and various comments. It is clear, though, that all of the participants felt that community open space is important and that the Draft Working Principles are a useful tool for creating a vision of community open space.

This content analysis provides a starting point for revision of the Draft Working Principles, based on Summit participants' personal visions of open space, comments on the draft principles, and suggestions for additional principles.

A final draft of the Open Space Principles can be responsive to Summit participants' opinions and concerns by addressing usability issues and environmental concerns, and by clarifying certain principles and explaining how the principles will be used to guide the future of open space.